7.1: Stakeholder Management and Prioritizing Publics

One of the most important steps in strategic and effective public relations is accurately identifying the publics with which you want to build mutually beneficial relationships. A popular axiom for public relations is that there is no such thing as a “general public.” In other words, an organization has a variety of key groups who bring different expectations for their relationship with the organization. These differences help an organization segment its publics into groups with similar values and expectations and to focus communication strategies.

Experts in stakeholder management and public relations have provided many different ways of identifying key stakeholders or publics. At the heart of these attempts is the question, “How much attention does each stakeholder group deserve or require?” This section is revised with permission from Rawlins (2006).

Because it is impossible that all stakeholders will have the same interests in and demands on the organization, Winn specified that stakeholder management be about managing stakeholders’ potentially conflicting interests. Winn (2001), pp. 133–166. Once organizations have identified their stakeholders, there is a struggle for attention: who to give it to, who to give more to, and who to ignore. Sacrificing the needs of one stakeholder for the needs of the other is a dilemma with which many organizations struggle. When these conflicts arise it is important to the success of the organization that it has prioritized each stakeholder according to the situation.

This chapter will provide a model that moves from the broadest attempts at identifying all stakeholders, to the more specific need of identifying key publics for communication strategies. The model is situational, and priority of stakeholders and publics will change according to the situation.